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Berry F. Craig

When John Bays showed up at Paducah in 1939 as west Kentucky's head "revenuer," he was not surprised to find the moonshine whiskey industry in the Between-the-Rivers region of Lyon and Trigg counties still booming despite prohibition's repeal six years earlier.

"A lot of people mistakenly thought that ending prohibition would stop the manufacture and sale of illegal whiskey," says Bays, 73. The Morgan County, Kentucky, native was a revenue agent Between the Rivers until 1961.

Bays, a Paducahan who is still fit enough to walk and jog a few miles daily, figures he is the only living Kentuckian who was in both the Federal Prohibition Agency and its successor, the Alcohol Tax Unit, which was formed in 1935.

Although Bays' west Kentucky territory encompassed 21 counties, he says he spent most of his duty hours "bird-dogging" the isolated hills and hollows between the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers (now the Tennessee Valley Authority's Land Between the Lakes outdoor recreation area) for telltale signs of illicit whiskeymaking.

If Group Leader Bays and his five-man team of agents were lucky, they would find a still in operation. But if its fires were banked, it could mean surveillance — in fair weather and foul — that usually lasted until the moonshiners showed up.

After the mash began cooking, the revenue agents, using bushes or trees for cover, would creep silently toward the still, mostly rectangular and made of copper Between the Rivers. While the 'shiners were preoccupied with squeezing corn, the agents would swoop down for the capture.

Compared to his previous assignments as an undercover agent in Al Capone's gang in Chicago and as a revenuer breaking up stills in the rugged Smoky Mountains of east Tennessee, Bays found the Paducah post relatively tame.

Gunbattles with moonshiners Between-the-Rivers were less frequent than in the Tennessee highlands. "Generally, when I flushed a (west Kentucky) still, the men gave up immediately or after a chase through the woods. And I hardly ever had to draw my pistol."

Sometimes, Bays bagged moonshiners just by walking up to a still, commonly known as a "dock" Between-the-Rivers. He recalls such an incident involving Casey Jones, the leading still maker — though not a whiskey producer — in Lyon and Trigg counties.

"Casey talked to the boys a while (the still was set up south of U.S. highway 68 in Trigg County) although he was careful not to do anything to help out. It wasn't illegal to just stand by a still. After about 30 minutes, he left by walking up a little path near where I was hiding.

"I slipped up behind him and told him to go back down and tell the boys they were as good as caught and he did. When he told them, they just took a few steps like they were going to run, but they stopped and shrugged their shoulders. Then, I just came down, walked up and arrested them."

Other times, however, the 'shiners made a run for it. It happened that way when Bays took William B. "Big Six" Henderson, one of the most celebrated revenue agents who operated in Kentucky and Tennessee, on Henderson's first expedition against a still.

"I had placed my men all around the still with 'Six' at the head of the hollow. I saw that the moonshiner was wearing heavy boots and I didn't think it would be much of a chase if he decided to take off. When I flushed him, he did run and, running hard as I could, I couldn't catch him."

"He ran up the hollow faster and faster and I lagged farther and farther behind. But he didn't make it because he ran right into 'Six' who grabbed him."

Bays remembers that the first woman moonshiner he encountered Between-the-Rivers was also fleet of foot — but not fleet enough.

"Dewey (the late Dewey Harrison, Bays' longtime partner) and myself had this still under surveillance in Trigg County (and were) waiting for the 'shiners to show up. Pretty soon, we saw this red-headed woman coming down the path to the still and we were both surprised to see her start it up."

"I told Dewey I was going to catch me a lady moonshiner and I circled around the still to put her between Dewey and me. I slipped forward quietly and as carefully as I could but just as I got close enough to grab her, I saw a snake right in front of me."

"It was just a king snake, but I couldn't help jumping up. When I did, she saw me and took off running away from me. And she ran right into Dewey who captured her."

Harrison, an agent for 30 years, died in 1962.

Bays adds that also unlike the Tennessee mountain men, the Between-the-Rivers moonshiners usually did not put up a fight when caught. "I never handcuffed them and almost never took them off to jail on the spot. I'd just ask them when it would be convenient to come to my office in Paducah to be fingerprinted and have a mug shot taken. They'd come when they said they would with a bondsman and a lawyer."

"Only one out of the hundreds I arrested failed to show up when he said he would. The word of these moonshiners was their bond. I guess this procedure was a bit unorthodox, but it paid off."

Indeed, Bays says that his easy arrest policy induced several moonshiners to divulge the whereabouts of other stills. "Our best informants weren't the preachers or the temperance types but the moonshiners themselves. They would tell on one another to eliminate competition, because of a family squabble or because they didn't particularly like one another."

Occasionally, arrested moonshiners would finger others right away. Some would arrange a secret meeting with Bays in Paducah or in another nearby town at a later date. "Their information was almost always accurate," Bays says.

He points out that a revenuer's success depended on how adept he was at "bird-dogging." Agents sniffed the air for the unmistakable aroma of simmering corn mash or drove slowly along a dirt road, eyes peeled for footprints or tire tracks. "Dewey was particularly good at finding signs like these," Bays says.

Once tracks were spotted or mash was smelled, the revenue agents would hide their cars and set out on foot. If they were on the right track, a path would appear suddenly in the woods a short distance from the roadside.

Agents knew they had struck paydirt when they found the "weed wagon," an old jalopy used to haul corn meal, yeast, sugar or other supplies to the still and also to transport the finished product out.

"It was plain old woodsmanship," says Bays. "It was like stalking deer or other game."

The revenuers wore camouflaged clothing which aided them in moving undetected in the woods. Bays says most agents donned dark gray, a color which blends well with tree bark. "You could see blue jeans or light colored clothing a mile off," he explains.

The agents' every move was watched as soon as they crossed the rivers into Lyon and Trigg counties. Realizing this, they often entered the region from the opposite end in which they planned to chop up a still, according to Bays.

"For example, if we were going after a still in Trigg County we would come in from Lyon County and vice-versa. Other times we would let our agents out of cars and enclosed trucks and keep on going. Sometimes, we even rowed across the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers in skiffs. It was all a big game to us and them. It was a challenge to both parties."

Bays maintains that he has never downed a drop of moonshine. It's not that he is a teetotaler. "It's just that I saw too many dead mice and other trash floating in the stills."